



# CONVERGENCE

THE ART OF ZHOU XIAOPING IN ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA





# CONVERGENCE

THE ART OF ZHOU XIAOPING IN ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

This catalogue collates the works presented at:

Museum of Chinese Australian History (Melbourne)  
ACIAC Western Sydney University (Sydney)  
Live in Art (Sydney)  
ACAE Gallery (Melbourne)

25 June – 3 August 2020  
27 July – 16 October 2020  
10 October – 20 November 2020  
3 – 24 December 2020

WESTERN SYDNEY  
UNIVERSITY  
  
Australia-China Institute  
for Arts and Culture

  
澳中历史博物馆  
CHINESE MUSEUM

  
Live  
in Art

 ACAE  
Gallery

Australia China Arts Exchange  
AUSTRALIAN CHINESE ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE



Produced in 2020 by  
Xiaoping Studio in collaboration with  
Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture of  
Western Sydney University

First edition: June 2020

© Zhou Xiaoping

All rights reserved. This book is copyright.  
Apart from the purpose of private study, research,  
criticism or review, no part may be reproduced  
by any process without prior written permission.

Inquiries: Xiaoping Studio, 3 Caroline Crescent  
Blackburn North VIC 3130 Australia  
Email: joxiaoping@hotmail.com  
Website: www.xiaopingart.com

Text of essays © the individual authors

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-publication data  
Convergence: The Art of Zhou Xiaoping  
in Aboriginal Australia  
ISBN: 978-0-9876170-1-9

Editor: Keith McLennan  
Associate editors: Mabel Lee, Jing Han, Damian Smith

Contributors:  
Yin Cao  
Damian Smith  
Lyndon Ormond-Parker  
Mabel Lee

Coordinator: Lindsay Liu  
Designer: Yichen Wan, Zhou Xiaoping  
Photography: Jack Zheng, Jason Li

Supported by the City of Melbourne COVID-19 Arts Grants



Sponsors:  
Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture  
Western Sydney University  
Australian Chinese Art Research Institute  
Museum of Chinese Australian History  
Live in Art Sydney

*front cover*  
*Faces (Zhou Xiaoping) 2020, ink, oil on rice paper and canvas, 138\*272cm*



AUSTRALIAN CHINESE ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE



*Artist Zhou Xiaoping at his Melbourne studio.*





*Self-portrait (Zhou Xiaoping) 2020, oil on rice paper on canvas, 173x180 cm*

# CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD</b>	2
<b>ARTIST'S STATEMENT</b>	4
<b>The Trinity in Zhou Xiaoping's Paintings: Nature, People and Spirit</b> YIN CAO	8
<b>Zhou Xiaoping: An Extraordinary Artist</b> LYNDON ORMOND-PARKER	15
<b>Zhou Xiaoping: Contrasting Worlds</b> DAMIAN SMITH	21
<b>Aboriginal Australia and Zhou Xiaoping's Transcultural Aesthetics</b> MABEL LEE	25
<b>PAINTINGS</b>	37
<b>BIOGRAPHY</b>	77





## FOREWORD

Zhou Xiaoping [you] have created a unique artistic style by incorporating your Aboriginal experiences into the traditional Chinese painting. Chinese and Aboriginal arts and cultures meet in your artworks. It is generating a new aesthetic while telling a story in Australia.

*The late Dr. Joe Gumbula,  
an Aboriginal elder and scholar from  
Elcho Island,  
in northeast Arnhem Land*

When Zhou Xiaoping arrived in Australia in 1988, already well-trained in Chinese painting, he was by chance introduced to Aboriginal art and culture in the Outback. He found Aboriginal art and culture fascinating, and for the last 30 years he has travelled to and from remote Arnhem Land communities, getting to know Aboriginal culture first hand and learning from and collaborating with Aboriginal artists. Zhou Xiaoping has been deeply involved in Aboriginal life and has made lifelong friendships with Aboriginal people.

Over the years Zhou Xiaoping has developed his own unique artistic style, incorporating features and styles from Chinese, Aboriginal and Anglo-Australian arts and traditions. His artworks, combining the two ancient cultures, are breathtaking and very powerful. Just as Professor Marcia Langton AO has stated, "he captured the soul of the moment". In Australia, where multiculturalism and diversity are celebrated, Zhou Xiaoping and his paintings represent a wonderfully rich fusion derived from this cross-cultural knowledge. Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture (ACIAC) at Western Sydney University is very proud to be partnering with other art institutions to exhibit a selection of Zhou Xiaoping's artworks dating from 2006 to the present, in both Sydney and Melbourne. On behalf of ACIAC, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Zhou Xiaoping on his extraordinary art and his exceptional success as a Chinese Australian artist.

*Professor Jing Han  
Director  
Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture  
Western Sydney University*





## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The world suddenly seems to be a roaring lion that does not welcome a human invasion.

In 2020, under the worldwide attack of the coronavirus, humans seem to be awakening. The humans who have occupied the world are not powerful as we thought. We may fall in an instant. It is very frustrating that if the world is without humans, it will still continue in its life and beauty. So people in this world are more like guests.

From April 2017 to April 2018, I held a touring exhibition entitled Dialogues with The Dreaming: The Art of Zhou Xiaoping in Australia at Beijing's Today Art Museum, Chengdu's Contemporary Art Museum, Jiangsu's Modern Art Museum and the Shenzhen Art Museum, in China. The exhibition demonstrated my cross-cultural artistic practice and brought together the influence of Chinese, Western and Aboriginal culture and art concepts. In this practical process, I realised how important cultural reconciliation and civilisational exchange are.

When I lived in the Outback, it allowed me, as an artist, to re-examine the complexity and the weight of the world I live in, and to reconsider the origins of art, thus providing more possibilities for the recreation of art – in particular, the main forms of creative expression in contemporary art, including protests, satire, counterculture, and subversion. Subversion is not the only method of artistic creativity. Learning and borrowing inspiration from nature are also highly creative. The richness and might of nature go far beyond human imagination. In the human world, the Aborigines understand the richness of nature better than anyone, and the power of divinity makes that richness greater. Every national culture contains divine genes and molecules.

Looking back at my artistic creation process in Australia, I feel that I followed the path of "learning from nature" from the traditional Chinese culture that I accepted when I was young, then followed that path from China to the world of the Australian Aborigines.

This exhibition is a continuation of the 2017 Dialogues with The Dreaming exhibition in China, and it is a sorting and inspection of my thirty-year creation of art. The works are all located in Australia, at ACIAC Western Sydney University, Live in Art Sydney, and The Museum of Chinese Australian History and the ACAE Gallery, both in Melbourne.



In the past and at present, there are always some people who like to take over the care of Indigenous issues and make decisions for the Aboriginal people. The following story led Xiaoping to create Don't Speak For Me. According to Xiaoping:

*One of my collaborative paintings has caused considerable controversy. It is a large painting (240x170cm). It was started by Johnny Bulunbulun. He painted with a traditional bark painting style in the centre-left of the painting. In his picture there were three kangaroos surrounding a waterhole, and other images. I borrowed the Chinese style and drew an ocean, with two blue and white porcelains floating. It symbolizes the dialogue between Chinese culture and Aboriginal art. The delicate dragons on the porcelain correspond to the bark-like kangaroos. I replaced the waterhole with a blue and white porcelain plate. Johnny was very happy with that and we were both proud of our creative work. However, the finished artwork attracted criticism from some non-Aboriginal people. The criticism was: it destroys the purity of Aboriginal painting, and tarnishes the special significance of the symbol of waterhole in Aboriginal painting. Johnny said to me that it was a collaboration between two artists and we should ignore other people's views. But one day I received a call from Johnny, telling me that he'd changed his mind. I asked him why. He said, "Because they wouldn't help me sell paintings, if I don't change it." I said to Johnny that I'd make the change. After hanging up the phone, I gazed at the painting, thinking, "Do the Aboriginal people have the right to speak for their own culture?"*

The painting "Don't Speak For Me" was selected in Sulman Prize show in 2011.



Don't Speak For Me, 2010, Acrylic canvas, 170 x 170 cm





*My World(1), 2018, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas, 138x272 cm (detail)*

## The Trinity in Zhou Xiaoping's Paintings: Nature, People and Spirit

**Yin Cao**

*Curator, Chinese Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales*

As the late Professor Pierre Ryckmans, renowned art historian, critic and sinologist, once said: "The ideal painting is achieved not on paper, but in the mind of the spectator; for the painter, the whole skill consists in selecting those minima visual clues that will allow the painting to reach its full and invisible blossoming in the viewer's imagination".<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to detect Zhou Xiaoping's three major minima visual clues as being nature, people, and spirit from his paintings created between 2006 and 2020 in this catalogue. Although the trio may not always appear in the same painting - and they might be executed in different styles using varied media - these three elements form the foundation of Zhou's understanding of Australian Indigenous cultures. Unlike anthropologists who typically record these cultures with words, charts and photographs, Zhou instead applies inks, ochre and paints on rice paper and canvas to express his observations and reflections on the land and traditions of Aboriginal people. The works were created after lengthy stays in remote communities in Arnhem Land in northern Australia, Balgo and Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia, and Mutitjulu and Yuendumu in the Northern Territory.

Zhou did not choose these clues by accident; rather his former education in China played an important role in his artistic approach. He was trained in classic Chinese ink art, particularly landscape painting before he came to Australia 30 years ago. Such landscape paintings, known as *Shanshuihua* (literally meaning 'painting of mountains and water'), are rendered in a monochrome of black ink or blue-green landscape forms. They are considered to have both spiritual and aesthetic value above all other genres of painting. In the vision of Song dynasty scholar Zhang Zai (1020-77), "nature is the result of the fusion and intermingling of the vital forces (*qi*) that assume tangible forms. Mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, animals and human beings are all modalities of energy-matter, symbolising that the creative transformation of the Dao [Tao] is forever present."<sup>2</sup> As early as the eighth century, Chinese literati artists - often scholar-official painters - started to pursue a more poetic and expressionist approach beyond realists' representation of nature. For them, painting became a means of self-expression without concern for the formal likeness of the subject. The brush is applied to convey personal feelings, philosophical concepts and attitudes towards the world.

<sup>1</sup> Simon Leys, "Poetry and painting: aspects of Chinese classical aesthetics" in *The hall of uselessness*, Black Inc., Collingwood VIC, Australia, 2011, p 293.

<sup>2</sup> Wei-ming Tu, "The continuity of being: Chinese visions of nature" in *Nature in Asian traditions of thought: essays in environmental philosophy*, J Baird Callicott & Roger T Ames (ed), State University of New York Press, Albany, 1989, p 72.



In order to gain a better understanding of nature, Chinese artists are encouraged to explore the wilderness, and to roam in the mountains and the countryside. Dong Qichang (1555-1636), who dominated the art scene towards the end of the Ming dynasty and inspired countless painters and calligraphers famously said: "Painters firstly treat heaven and earth as teachers, secondly see mountains and rivers as teachers, thirdly respect ancient masters as teachers. Thus there is a saying 'one can't paint until one reads ten thousand volumes of books and travels thousands of li [an ancient term for measuring distance].'"<sup>3</sup>

Zhou surely travelled far, crossing the equator to the southern hemisphere, and journeying from the big city to the outback and ancient lands that Aboriginal people have inhabited for tens of thousand years. But he admits to following the "learning from nature" path of traditional Chinese culture throughout his artistic practice, even when he settled in Australia. Living with some Aboriginal communities made him aware that how closely their culture is connected to nature, and allowed him to understand their claim, "Our land is our life". He also realised that it is impossible to continue the method of merely using traditional Chinese ink to paint the desert and capture the vivid colours of the subjects he encountered. He started to introduce western materials such as acrylic and oil into his works, mixing them with ink, in order to create vibrant pictures of the Australian landscape on a combination of rice paper and canvas. He also incorporated the new motifs he respectfully learned from artists with whom he formed strong friendships. For example, he incorporated the concentric circles, a symbol often employed in Aboriginal art to, "represent water holes, campsites, meeting places or other places of significance".<sup>4</sup>



*People, Nature, Spirit (1), 2019, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas, 110x180 cm*

<sup>3</sup> Dong Qichang, *Huachanshuisui bi*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=27645&remap=gb>, accessed on 22 June, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Robyn Sloggett, "Cultural rhythms and the work of Zhou Xiaoping" in *Dialogues with The Dreaming: the art of Zhou Xiaoping in Australia*, Australian conservation of Asian cultural material, Melbourne, 2017, p 93.

Even though he never received formal training on figurative painting, it did not stop Zhou sketching the remote residents he was living with. He has said that he was attracted by the power of their body language. In *Portrait of Johnny Bulunbulun* (2007) - a collaborative painting by Bulunbulun and Zhou - the standing Bulunbulun is depicted as a man of determination and dignity in front of his own painting. On the other hand, the soft touches in the painting of *Living in Arnhem Land* reveal the serenity of the bush family life of an Aboriginal family, reminding us of the romantic sentiment within Gauguin's work.

In recent paintings, Zhou depicted human figures that became more and more abstract. Instead of dominating the painting, they seem to blend in with the larger environment. Viewing Zhou's *Rock painting* (2019) and *People, Nature, Spirit* (2020), one can't help thinking of the Mimih spirits in Aboriginal rock paintings, which could be dated back as far as 50,000 years ago. In the belief systems in western Arnhem Land, Mimih are beings who have extremely thin and elongated bodies. They are said to spend most of their time living in rock crevices, and only come out at night by blowing holes in the rocks and emerging with their weapons and pets. Legend also has it that they taught people how to hunt and prepare meat, as well as to paint.



*Rock Painting, 2019, Ink, acrylic, oil on rice paper and canvas, 106x74 cm*



Those who are familiar with Chinese arts would easily notice that Zhou's work since 2016 presents two distinctive features of the traditional Chinese paintings: one is the trace of calligraphic art, and the other is the use of empty space (*liubai*). According to the artist, he practiced Chinese calligraphy when he was studying Chinese painting. Even though he had not practiced calligraphy that much since moving to Australia, Zhou's application of calligraphic strokes and lines into his paintings remain very important, whether it is for figurative or abstract works. While the dark ink dots and lines in the *Didgeridoo* (2006) are used to depict the poses of a group of dancers, the loose and wild lines in *Dream world* (1) (2018), *Sacred black* (2019) and *Dream world* (2) (2020) seem to be the abstract and spontaneous expression of these dancers' movements. These remind us of the "mad cursive" calligraphy by famous Tang dynasty's Huai Su (737 -799). As early as the eighth century, Tang dynasty poet, calligrapher and painter Wang Wei (699-761) advocated the execution of a painting with calligraphic brush strokes. For centuries, the successful combination of calligraphy, poetry and painting into one single work of art has become a keenly sought-after goal of artists down the generations.

The use of the empty space in Chinese paintings has its deep roots in both Daoism and the Zen school of Buddhism. Daoists advocated "attaining the limit of empty space, retaining extreme stillness"<sup>5</sup>, while the Zen school emphasised that "what is form that is emptiness, what is emptiness that is form"<sup>6</sup>. In a landscape painting, empty space can represent sky, cloud, mist, the fields or the river, and gives the viewer a hint of an immensely rich world of imagination. Ming dynasty Chinese painter Yun Shouping (1633 -1690) said: "If one is able to realise how the ancients applied their minds to the absence of brush and ink, one is not far from reaching the divine quality in painting".<sup>7</sup>

For the past thirty years, Zhou Xiaoping has developed an increasingly sophisticated style that fuses the influence of the Eastern, Western and Aboriginal artistic practice. The artist said what he is trying is to "express a divinity in nature, the coexistence and the connection of man, nature and deity".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5, 6 & 7</sup> Weimin He, *The mystery of empty space: an exhibition of twentieth century Chinese painting*, 26th July – 16th October 2005, The Ashmolean Museum, at [https://www.heweimin.org/Texts/mystery\\_of\\_empty\\_space.htm](https://www.heweimin.org/Texts/mystery_of_empty_space.htm) (PDF version), accessed on 22 June 2020.

<sup>8</sup> See this book p 57.



*Dancers, 2006, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas, 138x175 cm*

#### Bio:

Yin Cao has been the Curator of Chinese Art at AGNSW since August, 2011. Prior to that she was the Assistant Director at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University, Beijing, China, and a researcher at the University Museum of the National University of Singapore. Trained as an archaeologist at Peking University and Harvard University, she has participated in several archaeological excavations in both China and Israel. She has curated several exhibitions, including the inaugural exhibition at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University (1993); *A Silk Road Saga: the sarcophagus of Yu Hong* (2013); *Tang: treasures from the Silk Road capital* (2016), and *Heaven and earth in Chinese art: treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*. She also edited and wrote catalogues for these exhibitions.





*Our Land is Our Life, 2007, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas, 180x540 cm*

For Aboriginal people, the land is their lifeline. They own and revere their lands. Aboriginal people are connected with their lands physically, socially, emotionally, culturally and spiritually. The artist was deeply moved by the spirit of the land through his own experience of living in the bush. This painting reveals his emotional and spiritual sensitivity as he shares his reverence for the land with Aboriginal people.





*How Johnny Sees Me, 2009,  
Acrylic on canvas,  
169 x 265 cm*

## Zhou Xiaoping: An Extraordinary Artist

### Dr Lyndon Ormond-Parker

Australia as a nation has always sought to close the tyranny of distance. In his 1966 book *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Geoffrey Blainey, an Australian historian, academic, philanthropist and commentator, wrote of the geographical isolation that Australians felt from the nation's coloniser, Great Britain, and the major European powers and economies. Modern Australians have always sought to break down this geographical-isolation 'tyranny of distance' through technological development and engaging in local regional partnerships. Today, in these challenging times, the strengthened opportunities for digital engagement through Zhou Xiaoping's online exhibition are a commitment to sharing the rich cultural heritage of humanity.

Zhou Xiaoping is an extraordinary and legendary artist who has collaborated with many Australian Aboriginal artists. His work has featured in many exhibitions in Australia and internationally. In 2011 it was memorialised in an award-winning, internationally acclaimed documentary by James Bradley and Rachel Clements, *Ochre and Ink*.

As Professor Robyn Sloggett observes, "Zhou Xiaoping's art sheds light on traditions of art making that have been overlooked within the canon of Western art history... he helps us look at cross-cultural art production in ways that are reinvigorating, respectful and enlightening. In so many ways the work of Zhou Xiaoping remains new and confronting."

When Zhou Xiaoping first came to Australia in 1988, he found his way to regional and remote Australia, spending time in Alice Springs, the Kimberley, Maningrida and Yirrkala. He met and collaborated with Aboriginal people including artist Jimmy Pike, who went on to exhibit in Hefei, China. Later Xiaoping and Jimmy Pike exhibited jointly at the National Gallery of China, Beijing. Xiaoping also collaborated with ceremonial leader John Bulunbulun of the Gurrumbakurrumba clan, whose ancient influences are highlighted throughout this exhibition.

Our relationship with Indonesia and China was established several hundred years before European occupation of the Australian continent. Northern coastal Aboriginal people developed trading relationships with Macassan fishermen who were seeking the highly desired trepang or sea cucumber (*Holothuroidea* species), which is found in the warm waters from the Kimberley coast to northeast Arnhem Land. Macassan traders from Sulawesi in what is now Indonesia processed the trepang for markets in southern China and other parts of Asia. Today, commercial fishermen fish trepang in partnership with Aboriginal communities in these same Northern Australian waters.

As Professor Aaron Corn explained in a recent essay, "Long before the first Methodist missionaries arrived in northeast Arnhem Land at Mililingimbi in 1923, the Yolngu held extensive knowledge of their Southeast Asian neighbours. Some Yolngu people even travelled to Makassar and made families with shared Makassan ancestry. Makassan religion, culture, goods and seacraft are recorded in many Yolngu ceremonies still practised today" (Corn 2019).

The old Aboriginal trepang trade was highlighted in the exhibition *Trepang: China & the story of Macassan-Aboriginal trade*, held at Beijing's Capital Museum in April 2011 and at the Melbourne Museum from July to October 2011. The exhibition featured works by artistic collaborators senior Aboriginal artist Johnny Bulunbulun and the classically trained Zhou Xiaoping. Sadly, Johnny passed away in April 2010, a year before the exhibition opened. The *Trepang* exhibition explored the "centuries-old relationship arising from this trade that existed between Indigenous Australia, societies across the Indonesian archipelago, and China. Using a range of historical records, evidence from archaeological sites and objects of material culture, the exhibition documented these trade relationships and their consequence on the development of art and culture in Australia" (Langton & Sloggett 2014, p. 6).

Ten years on, in 2020, in a global pandemic, it is only fitting to show these beautiful, culturally rich paintings made by this unique collaboration between two artists steeped in ancient cultural traditions. Australian Aboriginal artists developed art practices based on influences from across the Asia-Pacific long before colonisation (Langton & Sloggett 2014). Zhou Xiaoping's deep and lifelong friendship with John Bulunbulun is immortalised in the current works. The work entitled *How Johnny Sees Me* (Zhou Xiaoping 2009), depicting Johnny photographing Xiaoping, reflects the deep relationship with collaborators from Chinese culture and "is also a powerful reflection of interest that Aboriginal people have in engaging with new cultural offers" (Langton & Sloggett 2014, p. 6).



The painting *Portrait of Johnny Bulunbulun* (Johnny Bulunbulun and Zhou Xiaoping 2007), which was exhibited in *Trepang: China & the story of Macassan-Aboriginal trade*, shows Johnny posing for his portrait, relaxed but gazing intently at the viewer. Johnny himself filled the background with a traditional use of *Rarrk* cross-hatching in the Yirritja style.

In 2020 we should be looking to our closest friends and neighbours in Southeast Asia, supporting each other as our historical and cultural ties have made progress across the centuries. Post European invasion of Australia, Chinese migrants were some of the first free migrants to Victoria in 1815, many working and interacting with Australia's Indigenous peoples as pearlers, miners, cooks and farmers. Relationships and friendships were forged with the local Indigenous populations and children followed. Enduring family relationships between Aboriginal and Asian peoples ensued from Victoria to the Kimberley and the Top End of the Australian continent, and those relationships, extending from Yolju people back to Sulawesi, endure today.

This exhibition highlights how collaborations happen, not just on the diplomatic international stage, but with human interactions and relationships. As one member of the Beijing audience enthused in the comments book of the *Trepang* exhibition: "combining together Australian Aboriginal sensibilities and Chinese art brought forth a wondrous beauty." Another commented, "Chinese-foreign cultural and art exchanges can open up our intellectual horizons and break through former boundaries" (Inglis & Lowish 2012).

Xiaoping's medium of oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas is combined with various Aboriginal, Eastern and Western influences in *People, Nature, Spirit (1)* (2019) and *Living in Arnhem Land* (2006). He is expressing ancient cultural living traditions in his style and storytelling. Xiaoping has faced criticism over his Aboriginal-influenced art style, but Stella Grey quotes him as saying: "I always sought approval from the communities I worked with and they had no problems." However, as Grey also notes, "even after so many years of making art with Aboriginal people, collaboration remains a constant process of negotiation" (Grey 2011).



*Living in Arnhem Land*, 2006, Acrylic on canvas, 165x245 cm



*Living in Arnhem Land*, 2006, Acrylic on canvas, 165x245 cm (detail)

The arrival of Europeans saw the adaptation and adoption of Western artists' materials in Aboriginal communities, leading to one of the greatest art movements of the twentieth century, a continuation of a much older tradition of sharing stories, of trade, influence and innovation among cultures. We are now reminded "that there is a strong need for global solidarity and co-operation ... A need to appreciate such global interrelations and the way in which all our lives as human beings are connected with each other could turn out to become the most important lesson from the current corona crisis for future societies" (Holtorf 2020).

We must now promote our ancient cultures to the world. Our trading relationship with China and Southeast Asia will be part of a collaboration to build our joint economic recovery in the months and years ahead. Our interdependency with our neighbours and all peoples across the globe is starkly highlighted during this COVID-19 pandemic, reminding us that we are all very much "part of an interconnected humanity" (Holtorf 2020).

Online exhibitions will be the norm for the immediate future. I have respected Xiaoping's work since seeing the ground-breaking *Trepang* exhibition at the Melbourne Museum in July 2011. I consider that this online experience will be engaging for viewers, as it offers a transcendent experience, an escape, for many people who find themselves culturally isolated and facing the 'tyranny of distance' in these challenging times.

Xiaoping says: "Art should stand at the forefront of independence." He is creating a unique art that does not resemble anyone or any genre. This courage and ability are rare and should be supported, respected and praised.

For those of us interested in art, and done with the 24-hour news cycle, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, the constant barrage of emails, and Zoom meetings, this exhibition by Zhou Xiaoping will be a pleasure to view.

#### Bio:

Dr Lyndon Ormond-Parker is an ARC Research Fellow in the Indigenous Studies Unit, Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne. Lyndon was born in Darwin of Alyawarr descent and is from the Barkly Tablelands region of the Northern Territory. He is a member of the Australian Heritage Council and the Advisory Committee on Indigenous Repatriation. Lyndon is a cultural heritage expert who has advocated for Indigenous cultural rights, including the repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human remains, material culture and heritage.

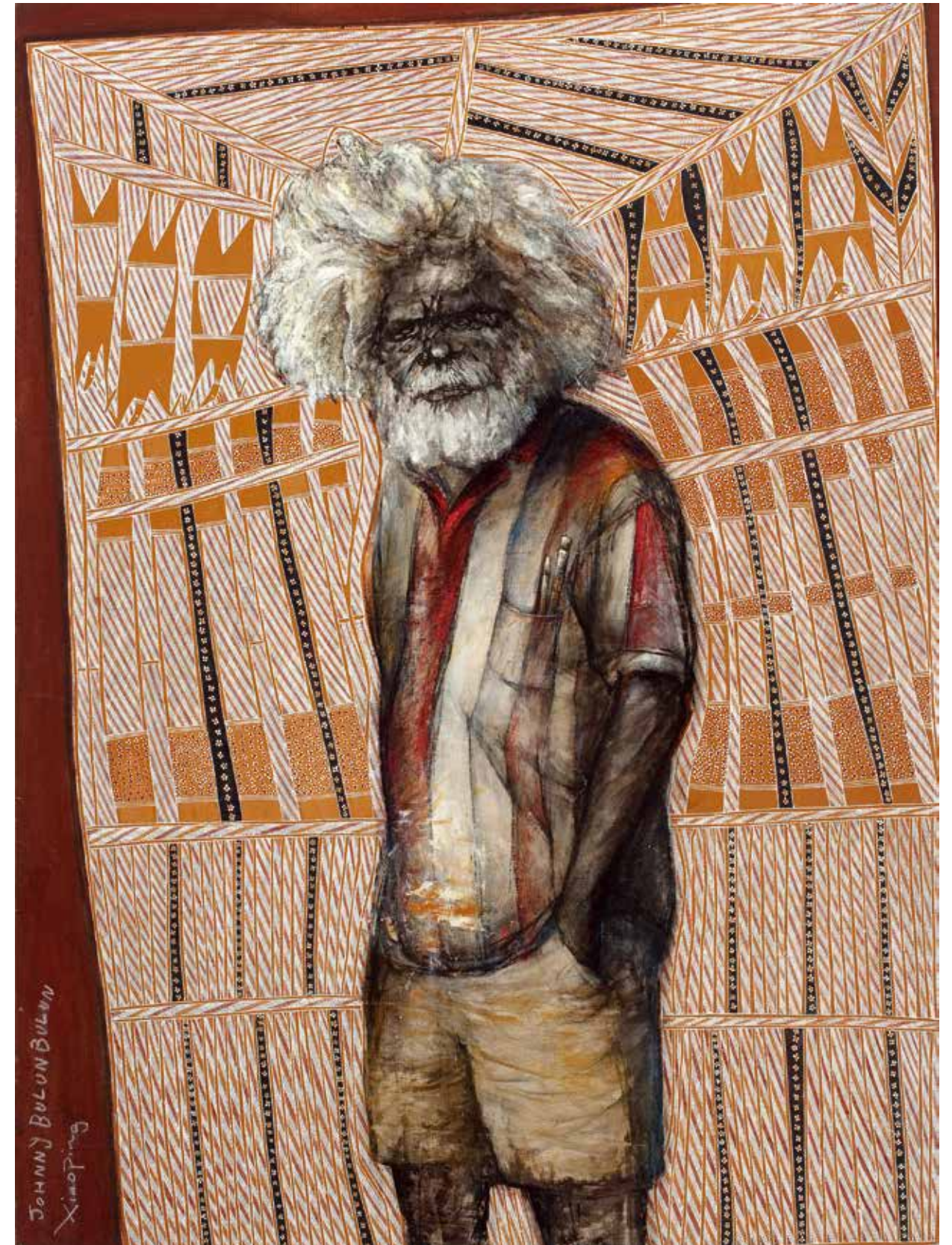


## REFERENCES

- Blainey, Geoffrey (1966). *The tyranny of distance: how distance shaped Australia's history*. Sun Books, Melbourne.
- Bradley, James & Clements, Rachel (2011). *Ochre and Ink*. Ronin Films documentary, 30mins. <https://www.roninfilms.com.au/feature/6500/ochre-ink.html>
- Corn, Aaron (2019). Friday essay: how Indigenous songs recount deep histories of trade between Australia and Southeast Asia. *The Conversation*, 29 November 2019. Accessed Online 12 April 2020: <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-how-indigenous-songs-recount-deep-histories-of-trade-between-australia-and-southeast-asia-123867>
- Grey, Stella. (2011). Creative archaeology over Arafura seas. *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 244, October 2011: pp. 61-63.
- Holtorf, Cornelius (2020). From corona crisis to heritage futures. UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures Statement, 14 April 2020, Linnaeus University, Sweden. Accessed Online 12 April 2020: <http://blogg.lnu.se/unesco/files/2020/04/Heritage-Futures-CORONA.pdf>
- Inglis, Alison & Lowish, Susan (2012). *Trepang: crossing cultures / creating connections*, Artlink, June 2012. Accessed Online 12 April 2020: <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3826/trepang-crossing-cultures-creating-connections/>
- Langton, Marcia (2011). *Trepang: China & the story of Macassan-Aboriginal trade*. Melbourne: Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne.
- Langton, Marcia & Sloggett, Robyn (2014). *Trepang: China and the story of Macassan-Aboriginal Trade – Examining historical accounts as research tools for cultural materials conservation*, AICCM Bulletin, 35:1, 4-13, DOI: 10.1179/bac.2014.35.1.001
- Sloggett, Robyn (2020). Personal comments by Professor Robyn Sloggett, Cripps Foundation Chair in Cultural Materials Conservation and Director of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne.



*Discovery of Trading, 2009, Acrylic and ochre on canvas, 230x168 cm*



*Portrait of Johnny Bulunbulun, 2007, Acrylic and ochre on canvas, 200x147 cm*



# Zhou Xiaoping: Contrasting Worlds

## Dr Damian Smith

*President, Australian Chinese Art Research Institute, Melbourne*

Zhou Xiaoping is a Chinese artist who arrived in Australia in 1988. But unlike so many émigré Chinese artists who gravitated to city centres, Xiaoping travelled in an entirely different direction. Setting metropolitan possibilities aside, he ‘went bush’, heading to some of the more remote Aboriginal communities across the Top End of Australia. Xiaoping’s story and his deep involvement in the Indigenous community are now quite well known and there is little to be served by going over them here. Less publicised, however, are the challenges and rejections that Xiaoping has encountered along the way. These came largely from institutional curators who were ill prepared to engage with his work and artistic style, let alone his involvement with Aboriginal communities and colleagues. As both a curator and an art world ‘insider’, I have often puzzled over the question as to why certain artists are excluded at institutional levels and others are embraced, especially in Australia where pride in cultural diversity and pluralism is seemingly universal, especially in galleries and museums. Uniqueness however has its price, and in the case of Xiaoping the path he has followed has been entirely of his making. In effect, Xiaoping has developed a style that is entirely his own. Through his paintings and works on paper he transmits a narrative that is not only his, but also redolent with linkages and synergies between two ancient cultures.

Zhou Xiaoping is the instigator of extraordinary and arguably unique collaborations with Indigenous artists, including Ganalbingu bark painter Johnny Bulunbulun, Walmajari artist Jimmy Pike, and Malya Teamay from Mutitjulu, who is both an artist and a board member of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Xiaoping has been tireless in his efforts to exhibit both the collaborative and solo works of his interlocutors in China and in Australia. At a stylistic level, however – and this is where those aforementioned ‘challenges’ come in – Xiaoping’s work is not in that preferred idiom of so many curators today, that trope of international contemporary art that is seen all too often as the sole signifier of the new to the exclusion of all else. Rather, both Xiaoping and his collaborators draw on systems that are steeped in ancient and highly specific traditions, and this has proven challenging where the uninitiated are concerned.

While local audiences will be familiar with paintings created by the Yolngu bark painters of Arnhem Land, for instance, the same cannot be said of the stylistic aspects of Xiaoping’s approach to painting. Born in Anhui Province, China, Xiaoping is the inheritor of a fascinating local tradition that includes the 17th century painters known as the Four Masters of Anhui. The artists of the Xin’an school, or Haiyang Sijia, exhibit a style that is sparse, monochrome and particular. At times, their images veer towards the analytical as they wrestle with the complex geometries and contours of the Anhui landscape. Towering rocky outcrops and hills folded across eons provide a challenge both to sight and to philosophers contemplating existence. The Four Masters are oftentimes compared with the 14th century painter Ni Zan (1301-1374), an important figure from neighbouring Jiangsu Province active during the Yuan and early Ming periods. Here again, dedication to articulating natural forms and an ease where expanses of empty white occur can be detected. Such artists, and the traditions they punctuate, are worth bearing in mind when studying the works of Zhou Xiaoping. This is especially important when accounting for the spatial arrangements of his paintings; the pregnant pauses that allow the work to be ‘completed’ in the mind of the viewer; the close analysis applied from treetop to bedrock, and the movement of humans through their surroundings. This is also worth considering when contemplating the fluent and fluid interplay between Xiaoping and his Indigenous collaborators who also draw inspiration from the land.



*People, Nature, Spirit(2), 2020, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas, 100x220 cm*





*Bowl, 2014, Oil and acrylic  
on rice paper and canvas,  
72x102cm (detail)*

As a newcomer to Australia, Xiaoping sits outside of the colonial legacy that marks relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Equally, he sits outside of that European fascination with the East. And as a contemporary artist, he has eschewed the preference for installation and post-medium practices. In short, here are works that emerge from an ancient tradition of painting but are extended both by circumstance in remote northern Australia and by the articulation of medium and form through the hands of a single-minded artist.

In so far as comparative exercises are instructive, the painter who springs to mind is not from the current period, but rather from the high Modernist era. That artist is the Scottish-Australian painter Ian Fairweather (1891-1974), who travelled to China and Indonesia before settling in seclusion in Australia. Far from being an 'orientalist', Fairweather rejected the 'East-West' dichotomy, preferring instead a meridian that was fixedly 'North and South'. Though stylistically dissimilar to Fairweather, Xiaoping shares a North-South trajectory, wherein common interests and sentiments link the different locations.

Xiaoping has combined artistic aspects of his home terrain with impressions that have shaped him in Australia. He has shared his project with many Indigenous artists, crafting a conversation between responses to their traditional homelands and to his own in China. That is a unique contribution to Australian art and one that enables greater insights into two contrasting worlds.



*Little Dog, 2019, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas, 138x200cm*

#### Bio:

Dr Damian Smith (PhD, MA Art Cur, Pgrad Art Hist, BFA) is a curator, art historian and academic whose interests include contemporary Australian art, contemporary Chinese art and expanded curatorial practice. He is the inaugural President of the Australian Chinese Art Research Institute, and is the Secretary General of AICA Australia, the International Association of Art Critics, Sponsored by UNESCO. Further information on his essays and projects can be found at:  
[www.wordsforart.com.au](http://www.wordsforart.com.au)



# Aboriginal Australia and Zhou Xiaoping's Transcultural Aesthetics

**Mabel Lee**

*The University of Sydney*

In Australia, Aboriginal Art or Indigenous Art refers to a distinct category or classification of art that is defined by the racial bloodline of the artist creator. Zhou Xiaoping is not an Aboriginal artist, nor would it occur to him to claim Aboriginal ancestry, even if Aboriginal Australia has been the endless wellspring of his art creation for over thirty years. Generally speaking, practising artists are only concerned with actualising their art, and few are known for articulating thoughts about the aesthetic guidelines of their art creation. Zhou does not count as an exception. It is usually the art historian or art critic seeking to better understand a body of art by a particular artist who will search for underlying principles that may have informed or directed the artist.

Zhou's choice to make Aboriginal Australia the exclusive domain and subject of his art explorations has probably limited the extent of research on his art, because Aboriginal Australia is still an emerging and highly specialised field of knowledge, both in Australia and in the global context. To date, publications on his art have largely been authored by established researchers of Aboriginal culture. My essay "From Huangshan to Uluru and Beyond in the Art of Zhou Xiaoping" (2012)<sup>1</sup> was an early exception. I formulated this investigative piece because my research on China's intellectual history has always included the study of transcultural aesthetics in modern and contemporary Chinese literature and art.

<sup>1</sup> Mabel Lee, "From Huangshan to Uluru and Beyond in the Art of Zhou Xiaoping", *Art Review*, 1 (Autumn 2012): 92-109. Much information has been summarised from this essay, because the journal no longer seems to be accessible. See also Lee, "Artist Zhou Xiaoping's Engagement with Aboriginal Australia", *TAASA Review*, 28.3 (September 2019): 7-9.



*Back to Back Bushmen, 1998,  
Ink, acrylic on rice paper and  
canvas, 138x200cm*

In order to extend the theoretical parameters for research on Zhou's art, I posit that his art is grounded on a transcultural aesthetics comprising three great art traditions: traditional Chinese expressive, traditional Aboriginal Australian, and Western modern. Although for the past thirty years or so Aboriginal Australia has been the sole subject of Zhou's art, his painting skills and techniques nonetheless were informed and developed by his initial training in Chinese traditional expressive art. He was aware of his artistic talent from childhood, and at the same time he was aware that he wanted to excel as an artist. His intuition-based training was acquired through rigorous daily practice. Later, as a practising artist in China, he read about Western modern art, but it was not until after relocating to Australia in September 1988 that he enrolled in formal postgraduate art studies with major components such as Western modern art, Australian art, and Aboriginal Australian art (in the context of its history, society, and culture). By the time he graduated in 1995 with a Diploma of Fine Art at Northern Territory University in Darwin, he was already beginning to live in Aboriginal outstations, and to enjoy the rare privilege of painting with Aboriginal master artists whom he was able to adopt as mentors.



The fine art courses quickly familiarised Zhou with the history of modern and contemporary Western art and with a wide range of painting practices and techniques. Soon he began painting with acrylics, oils and ochre, as well as trialling two different painting surfaces: rice paper and canvas. He found that rice paper best facilitated the controlled release of ink or paint that would flow on command from his Chinese brushes. He loved the vibrant colours of oils, acrylics and ochre because these were the colours of the Outback, and these colours immediately eclipsed the monotonous and pale colours that had dominated his paintings in China. His close study of artworks by the European masters showed him how light and shadow were able to create perspective on a flat painting surface, a feature absent from traditional Chinese painting. However, it was the abundant brilliant sunlight on the Aboriginal outstations where he lived and painted for lengthy periods that quickly established perspective as a permanent feature of his art. The striking physical presence of Aboriginal Australians had captivated Zhou on his first encounter in Alice Springs in 1988, a few weeks after his arrival in Australia: he knew instantly that he wanted to paint them, their faces, bodies, and the uniquely distinct way they moved their limbs. After he had spent lengthy periods in remote Aboriginal communities, participating in their daily activities of spearfishing, food gathering and communal painting, Aboriginal Australians began to appear in his art.

Apart from a few excellent examples of realist portraiture, the bulk of Zhou's art is expressive, semi-abstract, or what might be thought of as being in-between figurative and abstract, while encompassing a wide variety of themes pertaining to Aboriginal Australia. His depictions of Aboriginal dancers are particularly striking, and reverberate with movement, sound, and rhythm. The quest to achieve such effects in Western painting apparently has been abandoned, or presumably resolved by the introduction of new art forms and practices, such as action painting with the artist entering the artwork, or the attachment of audio-visual or other extraneous mechanical devices to a painting. Zhou endows static painting surfaces with movement, sound, and rhythm by skilfully applying the ink-splash technique of Chinese expressive painting. Since relocating to Australia three decades ago, he has nurtured a transcultural aesthetics that has allowed him to create a large body of extraordinary artworks, in addition to making an important breakthrough in the history of international modern art.

Zhou perceived an urgent need to paint, and moreover to express himself in large-format works, but he knew that to retain the expressive freedom he enjoyed with rice paper, he had to devise a means of reinforcing it with some form of backing. In 1995, he began the practice of mounting his large rice paper paintings directly onto canvas, and then bonding the two materials with PVC adhesive. Having resolved most technical issues, Zhou was ready to focus on fulfilling his creative ambitions as an artist.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Lee (2012), 100.



*Spaces, 2020, Acrylic on rice paper and canvas, 130x200cm*



\*\*\*

Zhou was born in 1960 in the ancient land of what is known as China, in the city of Hefei, the capital of Anhui province. He reached school age after the schools in China had been closed by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). His anxious parents, wishing him to receive a modicum of supervised education, arranged for him to take art lessons. He turned out to be artistically gifted and also keen to paint well. After the schools were allowed to reopen, he would usually spend an hour both before and after school making rapid sketches of people in markets and railway stations; then, after graduating from high school in 1979, he taught art at a local primary school while enrolled in an art degree at Anhui College of Education. At the time oil painting was fashionable due to the high demand for “revolutionary” works to be made into large-size propaganda posters to decorate the walls of factories, schools, and public institutions, and the walls of streets. But Zhou chose traditional expressive ink painting, despite the stigma it bore of being a “stinking” feudal and non-revolutionary genre. His art training involved copying to perfection the brushstrokes and compositions of the works of an artist of his choosing. Zhou chose the late-Ming eccentric Xu Wei (1521-1593), on the grounds that his bold and unrestrained brushwork endowed his art with unrivalled spontaneity and elegance. Ever since his time, Xu Wei has also been renowned for his strong stance in favour of the individual, his refusal to bow to corrupt political authorities, and his truly crazy attempts to feign madness in order to avoid arrest. Being an avid reader, Zhou was of course familiar with the exploits of this extraordinary individualist and artist.<sup>3</sup>

Upon graduating in Fine Art in 1986, Zhou at once set out travelling to explore the diverse terrains of China. He strode the mountains of Huangshan, Êmei and Guilin, the desolate wilds of the Great Northern Wilderness, the undulating hill country south of the Yangtze, and the deserts of the Northwest. In all these places, he could strongly intuit the geodetic forces emanating from the ancient land. By that time, he had already resolved to commit his life to art, but he was caught in a dilemma. He had trained assiduously in the ancient art genre that he loved, but he was acutely aware of being an artist who was living in the modern era. He perceived the urgent need to find an appropriate direction in which to channel his high level of training, as well as his powerful surges of creative energy. He studied ancient art treatises, and also sought the advice of various established artists. Strangely, it was the enigmatic response of the famous art educator Liu Haisu (1896-1994) that lodged in his memory and would remain of relevance. He esteemed the old artist as his mentor. Liu Haisu spoke of the unpredictability of life and enjoined Zhou to learn from the mountains and rivers, ancient poetry, elders and his own brush.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Lee (2012), 96.

<sup>4</sup> Ke Wenhui, “Preface”, in Zhou Xiaoping, *Sketches in Australia by Zhou Xiaoping*. Bilingual edition. Beijing: Art Photography Press, 1993. See also Lee (2012), 97.

Is it possible that Liu Haisu had seen into the future? Not long afterwards, Zhou happened to be painting from nature on the craggy peaks of ancient Huangshan when an Australian tourist stopped to admire his work. Zhou presented the tourist with a couple of paintings as a parting gesture, and this chance meeting later led to an invitation for Zhou to hold an exhibition in Melbourne. He duly arrived there in September 1988 to launch his exhibition of ink landscapes on rice paper.<sup>5</sup> When the exhibition closed, he wanted to see more of Australia than just urban life, and he was soon travelling on a long-distance bus to see the Outback. When the bus stopped at Alice Springs the largely Aboriginal population startled him, and, as first reported by Fotis Kapetopoulos in 1996, Zhou instantly knew he “wanted to paint them, their expressions, feelings and body language.”<sup>6</sup> He began making rapid sketches, and ended up boarding a bus that he later discovered did not go to Uluru, which was meant to have been his next stop. Unfazed, he got off the bus, thinking he could easily walk the rest of the way. However, the scenery away from the highway continued to seduce him, and he kept wandering towards new horizons until he became hopelessly disoriented, and on the verge of collapse. Suddenly three Aboriginal boys emerged from the bushes, pointing in excitement and shouting: “Bruce Lee! Bruce Lee!”

Zhou’s Chinese identity had been established, and the boys had saved him. After a night at the family campsite, the boys took him to Uluru where that ancient red rock instantly cast a spell on him. He would thereafter devote his life and art creation to Aboriginal Australia, and before long he was living for months every year on remote outstations to learn whatever he could about Aboriginal life, culture, and in particular Aboriginal art. As a newcomer to Australia, Zhou’s successful negotiation of complex administrative hurdles demonstrates his sense of mission and his tenacity, as well as the willingness of some kindly locals who helped him in his mission. The chronological tracking and analysis contained in works such as James Bradley’s film documentary *Ochre and Ink: A Chinese Artist in Aboriginal Australia* (2011)<sup>7</sup> and Jeremy Eccles’s “Insights: Zhou Xiaoping’s Artistic Explorations in Aboriginal Australia” (2017)<sup>8</sup> are excellent as foundation studies for Zhou’s engagement with Aboriginal Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Lee (2012), 97.

<sup>6</sup> Kapetopoulos, “New Lines of Communication,” *Art Link*, 16.4 (1996), 69.

<sup>7</sup> Sydney: Nirvana Films, 2011. The documentary premiered on ABC TV on 21 February 2012, and was broadcast many times afterwards. It has also been aired numerous times on NITV and SBS Television in Australia, as well as overseas.

<sup>8</sup> See Zhou, *Dialogues with The Dreaming* (2017), 53-61. Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material, Melbourne.



Between 1989 and 1994 Zhou “spent twenty months living and travelling through communities in Maningrida<sup>9</sup>, Ramingining, Oenpelli and Yirrkala, all in Arnhem Land; Balgo and One Arm Point in the Kimberly; and Yuendumu in Central Australia”; and in 1991 he was artist-in-residence in the Aboriginal community of Maningrida. Two publications have so far resulted from his experiences: *Sketches in Australia by Zhou Xiaoping* (1993), which contains mainly portraits of Aboriginal Australians<sup>10</sup>, and a memoir of his first years in Australia entitled *Xunmeng Aozhou tuzhu* (Searching in Dream for Aboriginal Australia; 2006).<sup>11</sup> Zhou notes that his encounter in 1995 with master painter Jimmy Pike (c. 1940-2002; Walmajarri country, Western Australia) had a liberating effect on his attitude towards art, and he began to think less about what he was painting, and instead to allow forms to develop spontaneously. Pike was his mentor, but they bonded in a friendship based on equality, as portrayed in his portrait *Back to Back (3): Portrait of Jimmy and Xiaoping* (1999; 207 x 154 cm). Pike accompanied Zhou on two occasions to attend the first collaborative Chinese and Aboriginal Australian art exhibitions in China: at the Jiuliumi Gallery in Hefei in 1996, and again at the National Art Museum in Beijing in 1999.<sup>12</sup>

Zhou was project coordinator of *Trepang: China & the Story of Macassan-Aboriginal Trade*, an exhibition celebrating the Year of Australian Culture in China, that was held at the Capital Museum in Beijing (1 April-29 May 2011) and then at Melbourne Museum (23 July-17 October 2011). Curated by Marcia Langton, Foundation Chair of Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, the exhibition showcased collaborative and individual artworks by Zhou and Johnny Bulunbulun (1946-2010; Central Arnhem Land) to demonstrate the continuing engagement between Australia and China in present times.<sup>13</sup> As in the case of Jimmy Pike, Zhou regarded Bulunbulun as his mentor, and while the two were friends they were also equals. Zhou had known Bulunbulun from the early 1990s during his artist residency in Maningrida, and he had been welcomed into Bulunbulun’s family, given an Aboriginal name, and allowed to participate in some of the sacred ceremonies. In reciprocal fashion, Bulunbulun and his wife subsequently lived in Zhou’s Melbourne home while the two men worked on their collaborative or individual artworks for Beijing. The unprecedented collaboration between two ancient cultural traditions resulted in paintings and porcelains that were unique in conception and beautifully executed. Bulunbulun unfortunately died in 2010, the year before the exhibition, but close members of his family were present at the Beijing launch, which was attended by numerous high-ranking dignitaries from diplomatic circles.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Kapetopoulos (1996), 69.

<sup>10</sup> Zhou Xiaoping, *Sketches in Australia by Zhou Xiaoping*. Bilingual edition. Beijing Art Photography Press, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Zhou Xiaoping, *Xunmeng Aozhou tuzhu*. Chongqing Publishing Company, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> The painting *Back to Back (3)* is reproduced in Zhou, “China’s First Australian Indigenous Art Exhibition” in Zhou, *Dialogues with The Dreaming* (2017), 108. See also Kapetopoulos (1996), 69-70.

<sup>13</sup> See Marcia Langton et al. eds, *Trepang: China & the Story of Macassan-Aboriginal Trade*, Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material, Melbourne, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See Zhou, “Collaboration with Johnny Bulunbulun” in Zhou, *Dialogues with The Dreaming* (2017), 113-121. See also how their art collaboration on canvas and porcelain was negotiated, in Jessica De Lary Healy, “From Art to Life and Back: Zhou Xiaoping’s Creative Encounters in Aboriginal Australia”, in Zhou, *Dialogues with The Dreaming* (2017), 67-73. See also the considerable film footage accorded to the exhibition and launch in Bradley’s *Ochre and Ink* (2012).



*Cultural Site, 2020, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas, 92x132cm*



Zhou's sole-authored artworks in the exhibition indicate that he was already progressively achieving artistic goals he had set for himself since settling permanently in Australia. His brilliantly conceived installation of numerous sets of ancient Chinese balances hung with parcels of dried trepang on one end and a brass weight on the other is titled *Trading* (2010; 250 x 1500 cm). This work was unquestionably the highlight of the exhibition, and an image of a single set of scales with a weight and a bundle of dried trepang provides the cover illustration for the exhibition catalogue. In his painting *Red Dancing* (2009; 176 x 382 cm), lithe young women pulsate with energy as their dancing bodies fill the canvas at the command of their feet, providing a stark contrast with the frozen gait of a file of old women walking away into the distant background.<sup>15</sup>

Zhou's installation *Untitled History* (2009; 170 x 190 cm) symbolises his two decades of engagement with Aboriginal art. An unmarked section of bark from the stringy bark eucalypt is mounted alongside a piece of rice paper of roughly the same size: the former is the painting surface for traditional Aboriginal painting and the latter for traditional Chinese painting. The art on each medium has changed dramatically in modern times, but in Zhou's installation each surface remains unchanged, and possesses a simplicity and elegance inherently its own. *Untitled History* is conceptual art that extols the purity of the surface on which art is created, and the aesthetic impact of this statement is startling and unique.<sup>16</sup> In Bao Cheng's "From Aboriginal People and Trepang to the Art of Painting" (2011), an article published in the Chinese-language weekly newspaper *The Pacific Times* (11 and 18 August 2011), Zhou refers to *Untitled History* as the most important work in his exhibition, adding that placing these two simple items alongside one another affords the viewer a huge space for aesthetic appreciation and interpretation. This line of thought is consistent with his observation that the artist may have various motives for creating a particular artwork, but once the artwork has been completed, the artist instantly abrogates any special right to interpret the work: artist and artwork have become disparate entities. In other words, the artwork has been "liberated" and consequently may achieve numerous layers of meaning. Similarly, his art, which has involved Aboriginal people as subjects for so many years, is also in this sense "liberated", and can enjoy numerous meanings and interpretations.<sup>17</sup>

With sponsorship in Beijing from Today Art Museum and the Australian Embassy in China; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu and the Australian Consulate-General in Chengdu; and the Jiangsu Provincial Federation of Literary and Art Circles in Nanjing, Zhou held a touring exhibition in China of his artworks from 1 April until 30 September 2017. In Beijing, Chengdu and Nanjing during the duration of his exhibitions, he delivered public lectures and university seminars on Aboriginal Australian culture, as well as its impact on his own art.<sup>18</sup> His bilingual catalogue *Dialogues with The Dreaming: The Art of Zhou Xiaoping in Australia* (2017) contains a significant number of new works, including a comparative set of four works titled *One Land, Two Views* (2017; each work 250 x 90 cm), in which Zhou pairs a painting each of depictions of the same "land" by Aboriginal artists Charmaine Lesley and Rene Kulijita. Zhou's continuing fascination with sacred Aboriginal motifs is shown in *Waterholes* (1) (2) (3) (4) (2017; 100 x 68 cm).

<sup>15</sup> See Lee (2012), 106 - 107.

<sup>16</sup> See Lee (2012), 106 - 107.

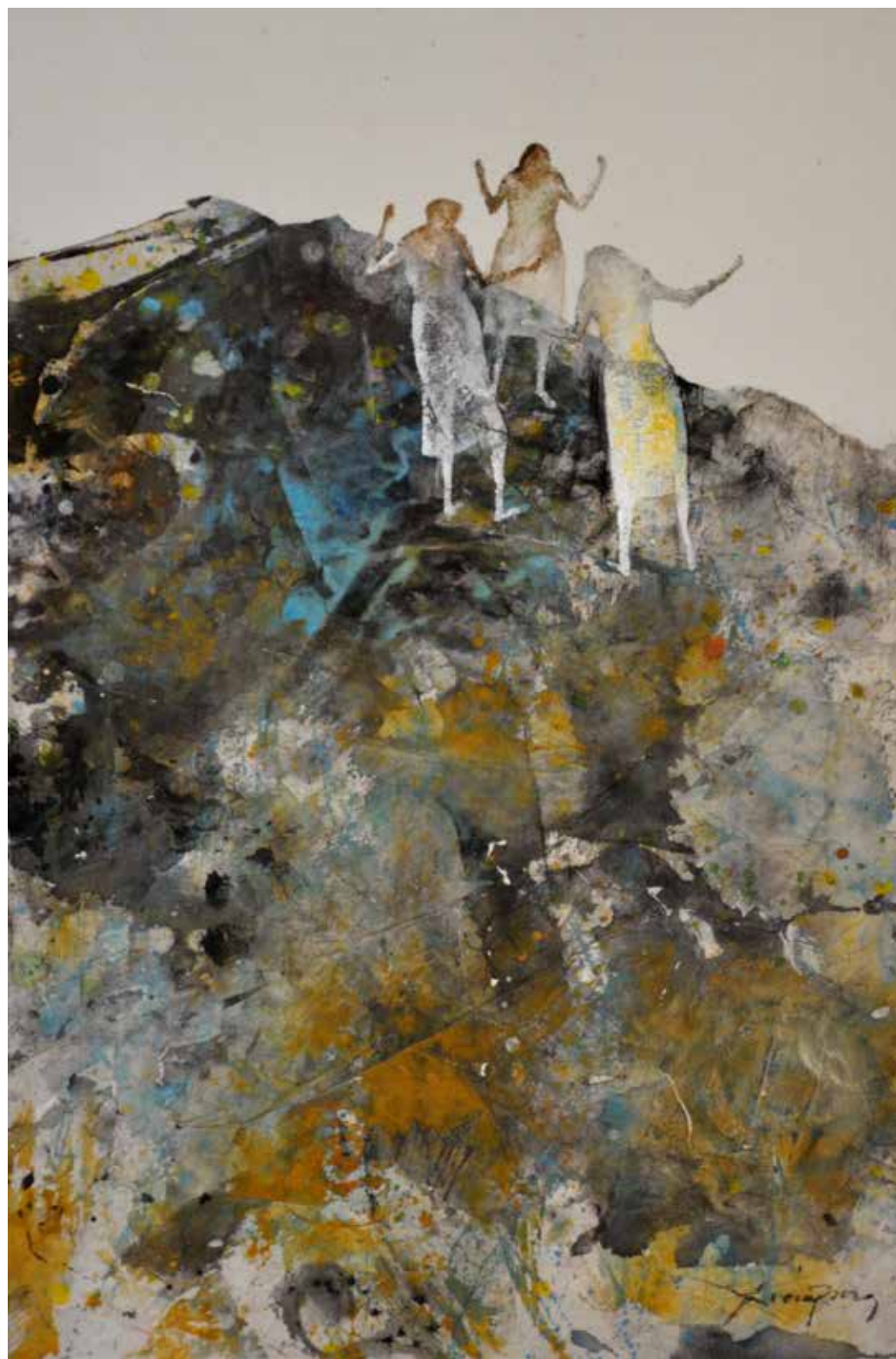
<sup>17</sup> See Lee (2012), 107-108, that includes a summary of important points from Bao Cheng's "From Aboriginal People and Trepang to the Art of Painting", *The Pacific Times*, 11 August 2011 (Part 1).

<sup>18</sup> Exhibition dates: Today Art Museum (Beijing): 1-17 April 2017; Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu: 27 May-2 July 2017; Modern Art Museum Jiangsu (Nanjing): 9-30 September 2017.



*Rock Man*, 2009, Ink, acrylic on rice paper and canvas 175x131cm





*Three Women, 2018, Ink, acrylic on rice paper and canvas 112x73cm*

In Australia Zhou soon established the practice of using the Chinese ink-splash technique to cover his rice paper painting surface completely with an assortment of relatively insipid colours before painting in stark and vibrant colours on that prepared surface. This practice was a negation of the Chinese expressive art practice of providing abundant blank space for viewers to enjoy maximum freedom of interpretation of an artwork. However, from 2015 significant numbers of Zhou's paintings began displaying blank spaces, for example *Women* (2015; 85 x 110 cm); *Between Two Worlds* (2016; 125 x 90 cm); *Crossing* (2016; 91 x 132 cm); *Red Mountain* (2016; 82 x 135 cm); and *Rock Country* (2016; 91 x 132 cm). In each case these beautifully executed paintings appear to be narrating a story, one about the ancient land and its people, and Zhou has deliberately created blank spaces to invite viewers to take part in that narration. The subject of his art investigation remains Aboriginal Australia, but his conscious recouping of elements from Chinese traditional art practices or techniques is evidence of his confidence and maturity as an artist. In some recent works such as *Sacred Black* (6) (2018; 175 x 380 cm) there is a complete absence of colour; in fact, the black ink and bold strokes of Chinese expressive calligraphy are prominently deployed, and only occasionally disrupted by patches of indefinite white or thin black lines. The general impression is one of light gradually shining onto a scene of darkness and throwing into sharp relief the figures of three Aboriginal women standing together in a group, presumably engaged in conversation. In the partial darkness three unclad figures can also be discerned. Only the face and torso of a woman are clearly portrayed, while the other two figures that are lying face down or face up could be either male or female. This painting powerfully demonstrates Zhou's success in achieving multiple perspectives and depths in his art. It also suggests that he could be on the point of embarking on new lines of investigation in his art.

In my introductory comments I referred to how Zhou succeeds in infusing his art with movement, sound and rhythm. I conclude with a special mention to another of his works, from his *Dialogues with The Dreaming* (2017), that also admirably demonstrates this. The work, *Leading* (2010; 128 x 323 cm), depicts three men dancing to provide the tempo for a number of youths who are learning to play the didgeridoo. Here, the tense beat of the men's stamping feet can be sensed surging from their soles, through their legs and into their bodies to guide the young didgeridoo players.

#### Bio:

Mabel Lee PhD FAHA is the translator of Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* (2000), *One Man's Bible* (2002) and *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* (2006), as well as his essay collections *The Case for Literature and Aesthetics and Creation*. She has authored numerous essays on Gao's fiction, art, plays, film and aesthetics. Her recent publications include "On the Creative Aesthetics of Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian", "Gao Xingjian's Chan-Inspired Absurdist Aesthetics", and Lee and Liu, eds, *Gao Xingjian and Transmedia Aesthetics* (all 2018).



## PAINTINGS

*Man's Back, 2017, Ink, oil on  
rice paper and canvas, 60x138cm*







*Sacred Black, 2019, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas 180x380cm*



*Bush Family, 2015, Ink, oil on rice  
paper and canvas, 138x200cm*







*My World, 2018, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas, 138x272cm*





*Faces, 2020, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas 138x272cm*



The artist uses the porcelain bowl as a medium to bring the history of trading between the Macassan, Chinese and Aboriginal people to modern viewers. The pattern and the figures on the bowl come from the design of a painting by Johnny Bulunbulun, while the bowl itself is another artwork, displayed in the exhibition Trepang: China & the story of Macassan-Aboriginal trade. The artist spent a year designing and hand-making the bowl according to the traditional techniques of Jingdezhen, a Chinese city renowned for producing fine porcelain.



*Bowl, 2014, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas 72x102cm*





*Dream Land, 2014, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas 137x278cm*

The painting shows the influence of Chinese landscape painting. The texture effects were created by ink and wash, as if the whole landscape were in a dream, roaming freely. The artist stated that the creation of this painting was like a crossing between the present and ancient times. Everything that happened in ancient times still exists today and will go on in the future. What is represented transcends time. The painting combines elements from Eastern, Western and Aboriginal cultures.





*My World (2), 2020, Ink, oil on rice paper and canvas 180x475cm*





*Dream, 2019, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas 110x150cm*



This is a land full of magical power. A 65,000-year-old nation lives on this land. The culture is both ancient and modern. People from modern society are so curious and strive to unravel its mystery. The land is also full of spirituality. People, land and spirits coexist with the world created by ancestors.



*Land of Spirituality, 2018, Ink, acrylic, oil on rice paper and canvas 120x180cm*





This is one of the artist's latest works. In the painting, one can still see the shadow of the Chinese painting style. It is a painting of creative fusion from the influences of Eastern, Western and Aboriginal cultures. The artist tries to express the divinity of nature, the coexistence and connection of man, nature and deity.

*People, Nature, Spirit (2), 2020, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas 100x220cm*



In this painting, the artist presents his view of a magical place which is full of spirituality. He has lived in this land and fallen in love with it. The environment made him feel at home. People say to him that he is a born bushman.



*People, Nature, Spirit (3), 2020, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas 92x122cm*



This work shows my understanding of the land and different perspectives in describing the land. There is the mechanism of painting with the rich connotation of this land in an abstract form. Each colour and stroke represents plants and various beings, creating dialogue between different languages and cultures. This is the art of the earth.

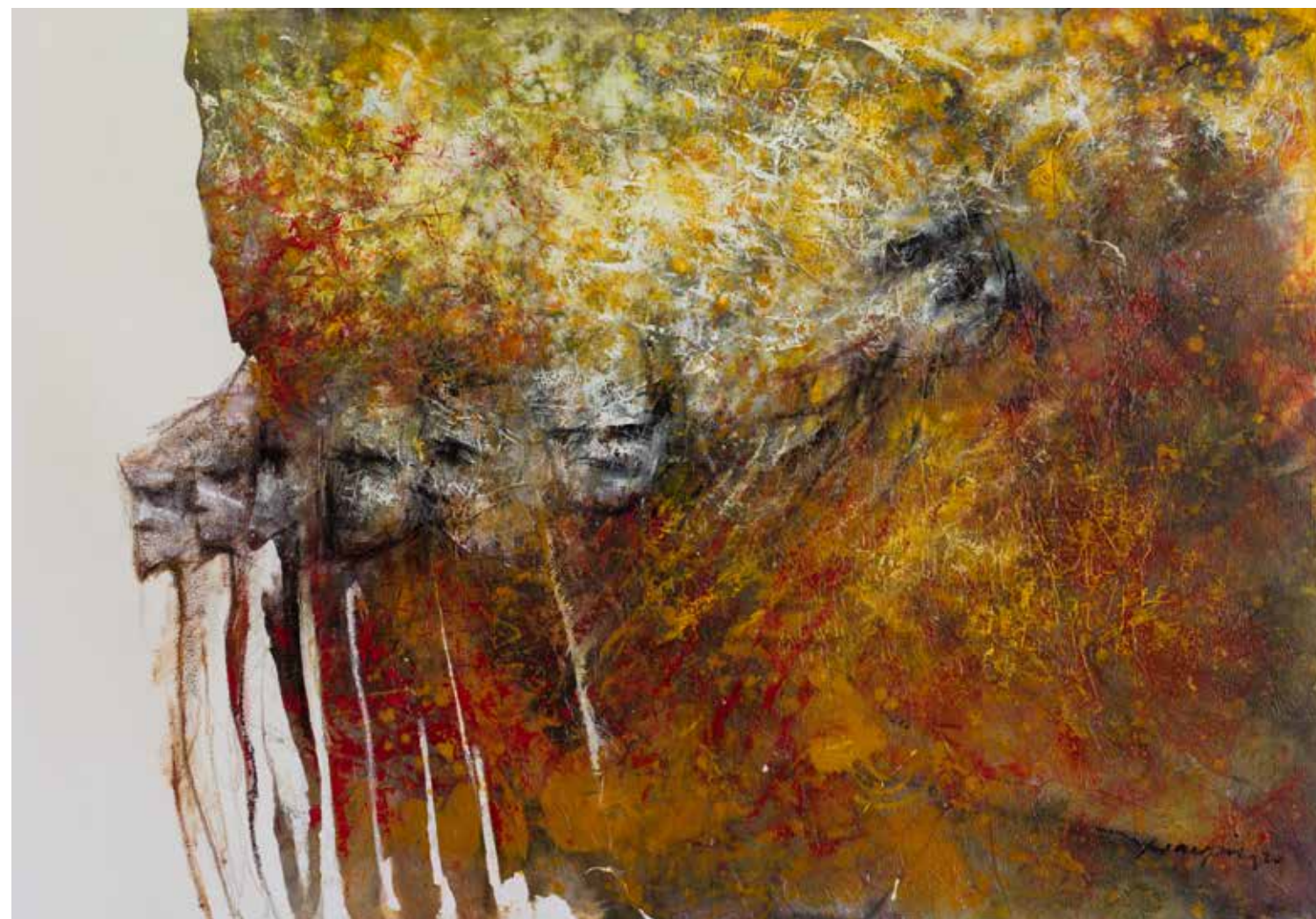


*Art of the Earth, 2019, Ink, acrylic, oil on rice paper and canvas 200x95cm (each)*





*Family, 2020, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas 112x92cm*



*Heads, 2020, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas 92x147cm*



For anyone living in the desert, water is essential. It is the source of life. Stories surrounding the source of water add to the mystery and rich connotations of this land.



*Source of Life, 2020, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas 92x147cm*



Waterholes play a significant role in Aboriginal life. They not only often appear in stories, but also represent sacred places which convey Aboriginal people's beliefs. Here, the artist uses ink, oil, and rice paper and his creative fusion style, consisting of elements from Chinese, Western and Aboriginal painting, to give his interpretation of the waterhole. The fusion of cross-cultural elements adds a mystic feeling to the landscape, with a puddle that looks like a black dog telling a great magical story.



*Waterhole, 2020, Oil and acrylic on rice paper and canvas 92x152cm*



"The painting was inspired by a ceremony I attended at Bidyadanga in 2017. I created an infinite space without any strokes. A group of people were walking out of a rock, as if they were travelling through two different spaces without time limit. I wanted to express the spirituality that enriches this country. " Xiaoping says.



*From the Country, 2019, Ink, acrylic, oil on rice paper and canvas 82x132cm*





*You and Me, 2019, Ink, acrylic, oil on rice paper and canvas 82x132cm*



*Living in Bush, 2019, Ink, acrylic, oil on rice paper and canvas 82x132cm*



Since 2016 Xiaoping has painted a series of paintings like this one. There is an untouched space left on the painting that shows the influence of traditional Chinese painting. Although there are no brush strokes or colours in this area, the painting creates an invisible and imaginary space. The theme comes from Arnhem Land, where he once lived. The ceremony is to keep the bond between the land and people and to continue the culture inherited from the ancestors.



*The Ceremony Bonding Land and People, 2017, Ink, acrylic, oil on rice paper and canvas 92x125cm*





*Women, 2017, Ink, acrylic, oil on rice paper and canvas 84 x 112 cm*



*Two of Them..., 2020, Oil, acrylic on rice paper and canvas 100 x 135 cm*





## ZHOU XIAOPING

Zhou Xiaoping is a Melbourne-based artist and curator, born and educated in China. Since 1988 he has been actively engaged with Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land and the Kimberley.

He has created a unique artistic style by incorporating his new Aboriginal experiences into the traditional Chinese classic painting that he had learnt in China. Chinese and Aboriginal arts and cultures meet in his artworks, generating a new aesthetic while telling his story in Australia.

Zhou's collaboration with the late Jimmy Pike resulted in the first exhibition of Aboriginal art work at Hefei Jiuliumi Art Museum, Hefei, China in 1996, and then at the National Gallery of China in 1999.

He was the driving force behind the ten-year "Trepang: China and the Story of Macassan-Aboriginal Trade" project from 2002 to 2011, in collaboration with Professor Marcia Langton, Foundation Chair in Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, which led to several exhibitions and a significant publication.

Zhou was the principal artist in "Trepang: China and the Story of Macassan – Aboriginal Trade", both at The Capital Museum in Beijing and the Melbourne Museum in Australia in 2011.

The international award-winning documentary film "Ochre and Ink" was broadcast on ABC1 Australia, in 2012.

In 2014, Zhou was invited by the Australian Embassy in Paris to open his solo show at the Embassy.

In 2017 Zhou was awarded the Australia China Council grant to tour his solo exhibition "Dialogues with The Dreaming – the art of Zhou Xiaoping in Australia" at Today Art Museum (Beijing), Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu, Modern Art Museum Jiangsu and the Shenzhen Art Museum, in China.

Zhou has held 50 solo exhibitions worldwide, and has published two Chinese language books on his experiences with Aboriginal communities. He has worked on a mural project at Mutitjulu in Central Australia. In 2014 he was invited to undertake a residency at the University of French Polynesia and Museum of Tahiti and its Islands. In 2019 he was Honorary Research Fellow, Asia Institute University of Melbourne, Australia.

